[A Pile of Sawdust]

Approximately 4,000 words

18 A Revises SOUTH CAROLINA WRITERS' PROJECT

LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A PILE OF SAWDUST

Date of First Writing November 30, 1938

Name of Person Interviewed Leo Peake (white)

Fictitious Name Clem Finley

County Richland

Place Pontiac, S. C.

Occupation Tenant Farmer

Name of Writer John L. Dove

Name of Reviser State Office

It was a damp, chilly morning in November, 1934, at the old Musser place far out in the sandhills of Richland County, South Carolina. A gleam of friendly lamp light came from the three-room cabin a short distance from the old Camden road. The odor of rich pine smoke floating from the mud and stick chimney at the north end of the cabin gave evidence of warmth within. The only noise among the remote hills was the clear bugle-like music of a

single hound holding at bay a late walking 'possum or coon or a house cat, possibly, out soldiering around across the fog-laden creek.

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“Been lookin' for yuh, Mister,” came the drawling voice of Clem Finley, a long, lanky, weather-beaten backwoodsman of fifty-four years, who stood in the doorway blowing clouds of strong smelling pipe smoke into the pine scented air. “Come right along to the fire, I knows yuh must be kinder chilly-like atter ridin' so fur and so soon in the mornin'.”

Clem was in a talkative mood, and asked question after question; to the most of which he gave his own answers. He was that type of sandhiller who would welcome a stranger to his door if for no other reason than to “git the news from Columby,” and especially the happenings around the court house. The truth of the matter was, he wanted to know who was being hauled into court for selling bootleg liquor.

“Hey, Docia, here's that furnisher man yuh been expectin'. Set yuh kittle and pots off the stove and come out and let's talk 'bout some 'rangements for payin' on the furnisher bill we owes in Columby.” After Docia had complied with his request, Clem changed his mind.

“Docia, mebby yuh'd better put that kittle back on the stove, so's to git some good hot coffee fixed up for him. Judgin' as how he's huggin' the fire here, he must be a needin' a little stimalent to git his blood to flowin' like.”

He began to look up at the smoked mantel above the fire, where an accumulation of bottles, fruit jars, and other articles had been deposited. And then turning with a knowing wink, he whispered: “Say, do yuh ever take a little snake bite? That mout help to thaw you out a bit.

“Shore, shore, Mister, I don't blame yuh nary a bit, for hit's a mighty bad habit for a body to git into,” Clem advised, after he discovered the blunder he had made in his effort to be sociable.

Apparently in an effort to conceal his embarrassment, Clem moved his 3 chair over near the front window; and just as he sat down, the Finley children began to gather around the roaring pine fire. Staring for a moment at the noisy youngsters, he volunteered the remark:

“Yessuh, seven's all the kids, 'cept Sol and Hank. They's twins and got 'em gals over 'bout Bull Swamp som'ers.”

“Here, yuh Glen! Git back 'g'inst that wall out of the fellah's way, and quit stickin' yuh tongue out at him like yuh ain't had no raisin'.

“Say, Docia, ain't that old man Musser a comin' down the road?”

“Looks like his car, Clem.'

“Shore that's him, I kin spot his car a mile. Mister, yuh jus' set still a minute. Docia, yuh better git busy and have that sewin' ready for his wife, and yuh boys be gettin' yuh axes sharp and ready to go to splittin' them stumps. Git goin' now!”

“Sorter pertend, Mister, that yuh don't know nothin' we talked 'bout, if he quizes yuh up. Yuh see, I don't want old man Musser to know I buy a thing, 'cept through him.”

Just as the last young towhead disappeared out of the back way, the roar of a high-powered motor faded into a soft purr at the front of Clem's cabin. Instantly there appeared a little waspy looking man, about seventy, who commanded, “Come here, Clem!”

“Mornin', Mister Musser. Light and stretch yuh walkin' stick.”

“Clem, how are you and the boys getting along with the stump digging I started you at the other day?”

“Okay, I figger, Mister Musser.”

“Going to have that load of kindling ready for the curb market by tomorrow? The weather's getting colder, and the folks will be calling 4 for pine.”

“Hit'll be right thar, Mister Musser. The boys are sharpenin' thur axes now and will soon git to splittin' the stumps we's dug out. Docia's busy on yuh wife's sewin' and will have hit ready to fetch 'long on the load of kindlin' to Columby t'morrow.”

“Good, that's what I've come to find out. Who's this gentleman?

“Furnisher man. I believe his ——————-.”

“Furniture agent, eh? Never mind his name. I supposed he was an agent of some kind. There should be a law passed to stop these agents from going about over the country meddling into business.”

“Shore, shore, Mister Musser, they orter be made to git up and git and keep on a-gittin'.”

“I will not stand for this sort of meddling, Clem. I want you, your children, your wife, all, to go about the work I want done and these agents left strictly alone. When this one leaves, I don't want to catch another of his kind on my land, understand?”

“Shore, shore, Mister Musser, I'll make 'em git if I ketches 'em.”

“I hope you got my message, too, sir, and will govern yourself accordingly. Good-day!” The car door slammed, and the crusty old gentleman rode off into the gathering fog.

“I s'pose yuh saw, Mister, I was perfectly 'greeable-like with old man Musser. Well, I been livin' on his lan' ever since I quit sawmillin' for him nigh on to twenty-five year ago, and I orter know by now that he's sorter hardbiled-like, and close as the bark on a tree. Of cose, I ain't sayin' a thing agin' him, cause I ain't never had a powerful lot o' money, and he's

got plenty. Besides, I've found out a number of times hit don't pay a body to talk too much back in these here hills.

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“Gittin' back to bizness, yuh heard me tell old man Musser I'd be over to Columby t'morrow with a load of kindlin' for the market. And then I've got a little snake bite to deliver to a certain fellah or two over thar. So tell yuh boss at the furnisher store that I'll drop 'round thar sometime t'morrow and make a payment on the sewin' machine Docia bought last year.

“Yuh ask me 'bout the kindlin' bizness before old man Musser come along. No, suh, thar shore ain't much in the kindlin' bizness left us atter old man Musser gits his grabbers on hit. The boys digs the stumps and splits the kindlin', and then they ties hit into bundles like this” - Clem reached down and picked up eight sticks of rich pine twelve inches long and neatly bound into a bundle by a rubber band out from a discarded automobile tire inner tube. “I deliver the kindlin' to old man Musser in Columby, and he 'lows me a cent a bundle. I believe he sells hit on the curb market at three for a dime.”

According to Clem Finley, his father, Solomon Finley, had been a tenant farmer and then a miller by trade; and, for many years, he had been in charge of the corn and wheat grinding at Hobkirk's mill, located near the eastern boundary of Kershaw County. Clem was the youngest of his family of ten children, and, by the time the lad was old enough to attend school, it was found necessary for him to assist his [?] father at the mill. Clem's assistance to his father at Hobkirk's mill continued for seven years; then the elder Finley passed away, leaving Clem with no book learning at the age of fourteen. Clem then refused to attend the community school, because he felt that the boys of his size and age would “guy him” for being in a class with the beginners. He, therefore, grew up to manhood without learning to read or write, even his name. The many contracts, chattel mortgages, and other legal papers he has been called upon to sign bear 6 his characteristic cross mark.

For two years after his father's death, Clem continued to live with his mother and to help around Hobkirk's mill, lugging heavy bags of grain, flour, and meal. When not needed at the mill, he cultivated the gardens around the “big house”, carried kitchen slops to the pigs, ran errands, and otherwise made himself useful around the kitchen and the barnyards. In payment for his work, he was given, on each Saturday night, such hand-outs from the kitchen, the mill, and the plantation commissary as would enable him to eke out an existence for himself and for his mother.

Clem and his mother had been permitted to remain on in the miller's cabin across the mill pond through the proclaimed “liberal mindedness” of the Hobkirks toward the “po white trash” of the community. No mention, however, was ever made of the fact that the hospitable Hobkirks required the Widow Finley to spend one day a week at house cleaning and floor scrubbing for them in return for the lone privilege of enjoying one square meal a week, eaten in the kitchen.

The only hours of recreation and joy Clem Finley experienced at Hobkirk's mill came on Sundays; and these he usually spent, all alone, on the banks of the mill pond, fishing or coasting down the sides of a huge pile of sawdust. He was sixteen years of age, yet he had never known the companionship of youngsters of his age, neither had he experienced the friendly hand of an adult, other than that of his mother's, against his youthful back in an effort to push him on to greater things in life. He began to brood over his situation; and finally on one summer day, in 1897, he asked and then answered his own question: “Leave the community? Leave the dern country, I will!”

When the lad returned with the few hand-outs in a bag on his back to 7 the miller's cabin across the pond that Saturday night late in August, 1897, his mind was fully made up. He found his mother all alone, as usual, patiently waiting. While she had never complained, Clem was old enough to understand, and he did understand, that it had become necessary for him to make a change for the benefit of his mother, as well as for himself.

“Tomorrow is Sunday, but not for fishin' or slidin' on the sawdust for me; for I'm goin' to start for Camden atter gittin' a bite to eat,” Clem remarked to his mother as he sat down near the smoky lamp to eat the corn bread and fried side meat she had prepared for him.

“Yuh goin' over thar to see yuh two sisters, Clem? Yuh know they's been workin' now for two years in the Camden mill and orter be able to help yuh.”

“Yuh guessed it, Maw.”

When Clem Finley, the flunky boy, failed to show up at the big house kitchen for his usual daily tasks on Monday morning, there were complaints and threats made by the powers that be on the hill. But investigation of the miller's cabin beyond the pond, revealed that the “Po' white trash,” like the Arabs of the desert, had bundled their few belongings and moved on in the night in search of a new oasis.

After saying good-bye to his mother and to his two sisters in the Camden mill village one morning in September, 1897, Clem Finley turned his back on his native county. In addition to fifty cents in his pocket and the suit of blue overalls, chambray shirt, and brogan shoes, which he wore, he possessed only his faith in the future. He was now on his own, he knew, as he slowly, but surely, made his way on foot along the old Camden - Columbia road, deeper and deeper into the sandhills and long leaf pine forests.

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“Hit was late that evenin' when I heard that chang - chang - chang noise made by the big saw at old man Musser's mill a chawin' her way through a heavy pine log. She made sweet music to my yurs, for I was way out thar in the woods tired and hongry, and I had no job and no place to stay.

“Old man Musser did gimme a job in the woods cuttin' logs at fifty cents a day and my grub. He fed the fellahs on cawn bread, cowpeas, and fat back, cooked at the mill camp. I slep' at night in one of the mill shanty houses 'long wid the other mill fellahs. I worked from

sun till sun, six days a week. In two years time old man Musser gimme a raise to seventy-five cents a day, and toward the last he gimme a dollar a day.”

Clem was with Musser's sawmill gang for ten years. The only shift in the scene of his daily activity came with a moving of the mill to a new location among the tall pines. Day after day - spring, summer, fall, and winter - Clem continued to carry on, like a soldier, where the lordly pines stood thickest. One by one, he saw those pines come crashing to the ground before the onslaughts of the woodmen's axes. And while they fell, he saw huge mounds of sawdust grow. As he put it, “I was raised in a pile of sawdus', and I reckon I'd a been a livin' in a sawdus' pile till yet if old man Musser could'er foun' more pines to make a sawdus' pile. We cut and sawed pines till thar was't no more pines to cut and saw in these here hills. In the winter of 1907, he shut down the sawin' bizness, lock, stock, and barrel.”

Immediately after Musser's sawmill operations ceased, Clem Finley decided that he wanted to remain in the community and try his hand at farming - cotton growing - on the cut-over land around the last mill site.

He, in the meantime, had made the acquaintance of Docia Lawhorne, the 9 daughter of a nearby tenant farmer who had, part of his time, worked at the sawmill. Musser, owner of the land, had given Clem permission to tend as many acres as was possible for him to tend with one of the mules formerly used at the mill and now owned by Clem purchased with his savings. The bargain was for Clem to tend the land, rent free the first year, in order to get it under cultivation. And then one-fourth of the cotton yield each succeeding year was to go for rent. He was also given permission to use the sawmill shanties for a farm dwelling and barns.

With “Old Sawmill”, as the mule was called, a few farm tools, and a number of articles of household and kitchen furniture. Clem started to farming in the spring of 1908. It was well for him his first year that he possessed a slow sawmill mule and that he had access to a timber pile. The breaking of the root-infested newground land proved no easy task.

Clem had to say “Whoa, Sawmill” many times in order to have a free hand to rub away a stomach pain caused by a sudden hunch by his plow as it came in contact with an unwieldy root or stump. Occasionally there was a broken plow beam, and then a delay in the work until a new beam, hewm from timber left at the sawmill, could be made and refitted in place of the broken one.

Clem was able to do hard work, and he was not a lazy man. He kept on the job his first year until he succeeded in getting ten acres of cotton and five acres of corn planted and cultivated. The soil was new and fertile, the season was favorable, and, since the land was free of noxious weeds and grasses, a good yield of both cotton and corn was obtained. He produced eight bales of cotton, and corn sufficient for the next year's operation. Best of all, the price received for cotton and cottonseed that year was good, and Clem made money. With the new farmhouse he had built at “lay-by-time” during the year, from the slabs and other rough lumber left 10 at the sawmill, he felt that he was well on his way to independence.

With his farm better equipped and with money in his possession to further expand his operations, Clem married Docia Lawhorne during the Christmas holidays in 1908. “And sich another fiddlin' and a dancin' as we had that Christmas,” Clem explained. He and Docia were both the children of tenant farmers, they were grandchildren of tenant farmers, the great-grandchildren, and on back. But Clem had revolved to change it for himself and Docia. “I said to Docia, 'Docia, I'll pay taxes on my las' 'fore I die, I will. This here fifty acre of cut-over lan' will be our'n in a year or two. Old man Musser has promise hit as soon as we can pay five hundred down. Yuh'll hafter quit lookin' through that big Roebuck Catalogue, a-pickin' out rugs, shades, curtains, and other purty do-dads. And yuh'll hafter stop listenin' to the talk of these here stove agents and sewin' machine agents comin' to our door.'”

Clem Finley started his farming operations with renewed hopes for the future during the spring of [1909?]. He had Docia to help him to tend more land to grow cotton. He

explained: “I'll use Old Sawmill one more year and tend fifteen acres of cotton. The next year, I'll be able to swap Old Sawmill and pay the difference on two good plow mules. I can then work the entire fifty acres of cut-over land. Yes, I'll work all the harder, and Docia has promise to help with the hoein' and the pickin' of the cotton.”

Well, things didn't pan out during 1909 as Clem had planned. The old sawmill mule died during the planting season, and he was compelled to go in debt for a plow mule to take the place of Old Sawmill, signing a crop lien and other chattel mortgage papers on his few earthly possessions as security for payment. The season, too, was not favorable for crop production. “Me and Docia picked eight bales of cotton off fifteen acres that fall, and the 11 cawn patch made a few nubbins. After givin' the fourth to old man Musser for rent, thar wan't enough left to finish payin' on the mule we got at the supply store over on the railroad, near Columby. But Sol and Hank, the twins, was bawn in November of that year, and I felt my luck was still with me.”

Clem Finley was far from being discouraged, although in debt. He was the proud father of two husky boys, and, in a few years, he would have plenty of help to tend more land to grow more cotton, he reasoned. He would work all the harder during 1910, and deny himself and Docia all the more in order to get ahead. But again things didn't pan out as Clem had planned them. The spring of 1910 proved a dry season, and it was around the middle of June before the rains came, and he was unable to get his fifteen acres of cotton up and started to growing. Then the summer was a wet season, and the weeds and crab grass grew so profusely in the cotton field that Clem, with the help of Docia, could not keep it hoed out. He gathered four bales of cotton and an abundance of crab grass hay that fall. One bale went for rent, and the other three bales were delivered to the supply merchant over on the railroad, near Columbia, for deduction on debt. Clem was not discouraged, however, for Docia presented him with another son, this time as a Christmas present. “'Just a few more years and I'll be able to tend more lan' to grow more cotton,' I figgered.”

The year 1911 proved a good crop year, and Clem made twelve bales of cotton; but while he was making a big cotton crop, there was a big crop of it made all over the country, and the price went down that fall. After delivering three bales for rent and the nine remaining to the supply merchant over on the railroad, now Columbia, he was told that he lacked one bale of having enough cotton to pay out of debt.

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According to Clem, his cotton growing business the next year, and the next, proved as ever a hit and miss proposition; and, all the while, he fell deeper and deeper into debt and more and more under obligation to the supply merchant over on the railroad, near Columbia. “Then come the fall of 1914, a big cotton crop, the war across the water and no market for cotton, except the buy-a-bale movement. The big shot in the supply store over on the railroad, near Columby, tole me one day that fall that he'd got to the place whar he hated the sight of a mule, a one-hoss wagin, and a darn bale of cotton.”

At the beginning of 1915, Clem's old enthusiasm and pep were definitely on the wane. He realized that he was deeply in debt, but just how much he owed the supply merchant over on the railroad, near Columbia, he had no way of knowing. With each succeeding year thereafter, he grew more indifferent, insofar as tending more land to grow more cotton was concerned. His narrative ran as follows:

“When the year 1917 come, the sandy lan' I worked had got white on top, and so po' that hit 'ud hardly sprout cowpeas any mo'. Hit didn't bother me none, tho', 'cause I'd been a-growin' and a-deliverin' cotton to the supply merchant over on the railroad, near Columby, and all I'd ever git outer hit 'ud be deducks for dis and deducks for dat, till, finally deducks 'ud eat all my cotton up.” After a long raucous laugh, Clem then told of his experience during the war period.

With 1918, and the war, came prohibition. There was a demand for laborers, skilled and unskilled, and prices skyrocketed. Clem Finley offered his service to the Government

in 1917 an a carpenter. He was put to work as a skilled carpenter in the construction of Camp Jackson, a short distance from his home on the old Camden road. He received 13 six dollars a day for nearly a year. He had lots of money to spend, and he spent it freely for every need - real or imaginary. “Sol and Hank was ten year old, and I wanted them and Docia to be happy. They got so they expected me to fetch 'em somethin' ever evenin' when I come home from my work. I bought 'em plenty little [hawns,?] and the like, to blow and make music for their tired old daddy to hear. And I can hear Sol and Hank a blowin' them little hawns yet.”

But not for long was the wave of prosperity to continue. There was the signing of the armistics in November, 1918, the return of the soldiers in 1919, and then retrenchment in Government spending; and, finally, a readjustment of business to a normal basis at the end of 1920. About the only item remaining of the list of war measures was prohibition.

Clem, after his short period of prosperity in 1918, became connected with a chain of pony sawmills located here and there in the sandhills. Sawmills these were in form, and they sawed a little lumber sometimes. But many people soon learned that the organization produced and sold other things, one of which Clem called “snake bite”.” At any rate, Clem said, “Hit was my job to git the stocks to the mills som'ers in the san'hills.”

According to Clem, he worked with the pony sawmill organization until 1933, when the mills, like Musser's of years before, had shut down “lock, stock, and barrel.” He returned then to the sandhill farm, older in experience as well as in years. His financial status, however, had not been improved, and he was again a tenant farmer for “old man Musser.” But he had Docia and five sons and two daughters with him. Sol and Hank, the twins, had married and were living at Bull Swamp in an adjoining county. Docia was a good seamstress, and the boys cultivated the corn, potato, and garden patches during the spring and summer months. In the fall and winter 14 months, the boys dug pine stumps and split kindling for Clem to deliver along with “a little snake bite to a certain fellah or two over thar.”

Library of Congress

During the fall of 1936, Clem Finley came to grief on the soil impoverished sandhill farm on the old Musser place. He was caught making a delivery of “snake bite,” his name for bootleg liquor, and was sent up by the courts in an adjoining county to serve a jail sentence. Docia, his wife, and a number of their children still live on the sandhill farm. They spend their time at trying to produce things for sale on the Columbia curb market, and in waiting for Clem's return.

“Y - e - s,” sighed Mrs. Finley, as she bit the sewing thread from the garment in her lap, “we know Clem's goin' to come back. It was in these here san'hills he was bawn and raised. It was in these same hills, too, that he's lived and worked for fifty-eight years. He's been through the mill durin' that time, and he knows nowhar else.” As she folded the patched trousers - Clem's trousers - she added, “But he will come back and try again and again.”

JJC